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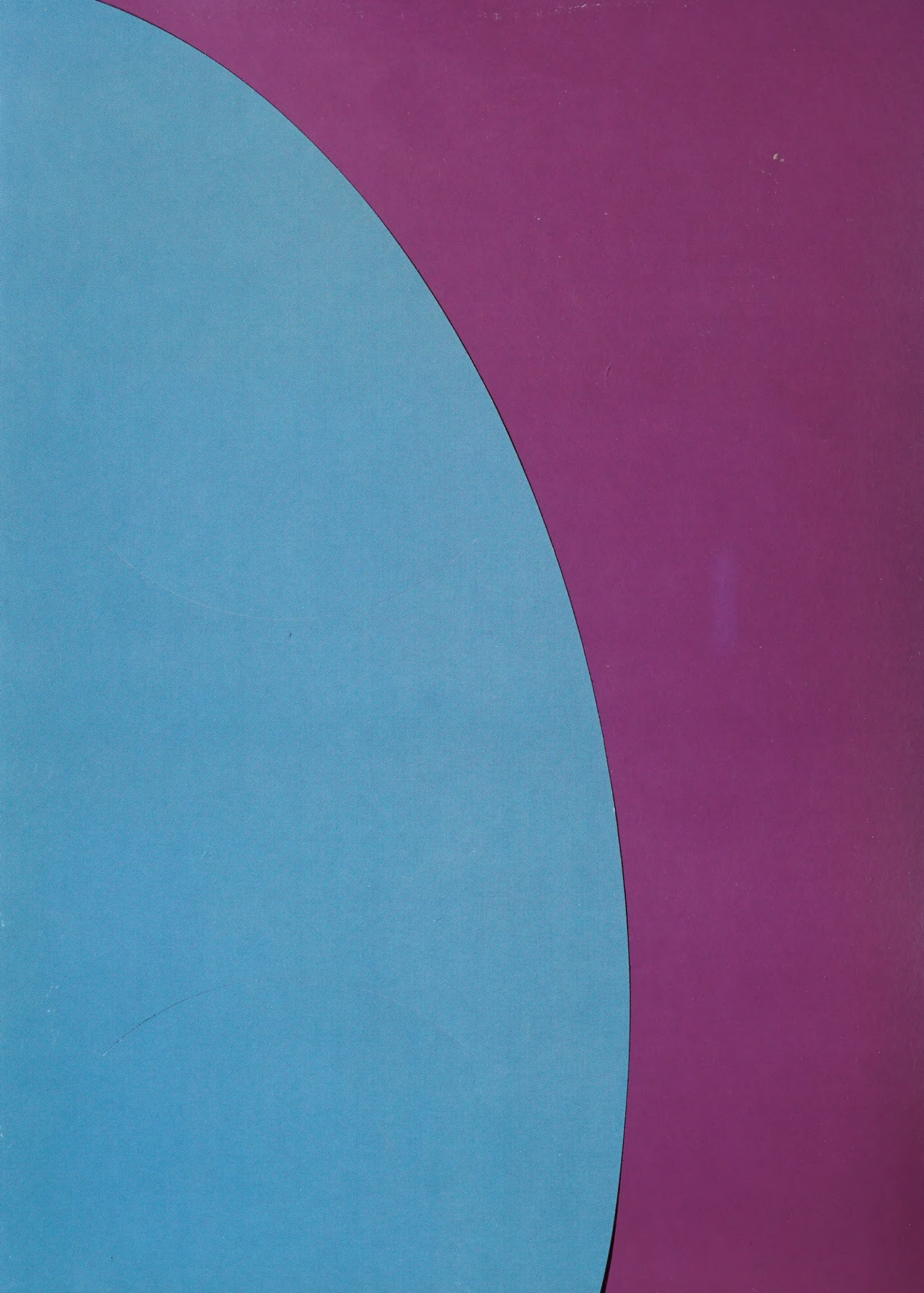
Government
Publications

Community Dialogue Toolkit



Supporting Local Solutions to Local Challenges

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For the Dialogue Facilitator

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The Role of the Dialogue Facilitator

The facilitator's role is an important one that requires especially good listening skills, knowledge and ability of when not to talk. The facilitator must also help set and follow ground rules for participation in the dialogue. Establishing rules helps to create a safe environment for openness and sharing. The facilitator's basic responsibility is to the group as a whole, while also considering each person's individuality and level of comfort.

Facilitators are critical to making the dialogue work

As the facilitator of a dialogue you do not need to be an “expert” or even the most knowledgeable person in the group on the topic being discussed. However, you should be the best prepared for the discussion. It is up to the facilitator to keep the group moving forward, using phrases that enhance conversations and encourage discussion. This means understanding the goals of the dialogue, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help the group tackle their subject. The facilitator guides the process to ensure that it stays on track and avoids obstacles that could derail it. He or she is also impartial in it. This means that the facilitator should not favour one person or point of view, or add personal opinions. The facilitator lets the participants dictate the flow of the discussion. Solid preparation will enable you to give your full attention to how the participants are relating to each other and to what they are saying.

The facilitator plays several roles

At the start of the session, remind everyone that the purpose is to have an open, honest, cooperative dialogue, and that your role as leader is to remain neutral, keep the discussion focussed, and follow the ground rules. Before the discussion begins, help the participants establish ground rules and ensure that all participants are willing to follow them. Ground rules must emphasize respect, listening, honesty and the importance of sharing time equitably. Stress the importance of respecting different opinions and perspectives. You might post the following sample ground rules on a flip chart, or give one sample ground rule and ask the group to come up with more. You could then ask, “Are there any questions about these ground rules? Can we all agree to them before we continue?”

The following tips describe what a good facilitator should strive to do:

- **Establish ground rules for the group**

Your conversation will proceed more smoothly if you and the participants agree on clear ground rules.

- **Set a relaxed and open tone**

- **Stay neutral**

This may be the most important point to remember as the leader of a dialogue. You should not share your personal views or try to advance your agenda on the issue. You are there to serve the discussion, not to join it.

- **Keep track of who is contributing and who is not**

You are not only helping to keep the group focussed on the content of the discussion, but you are monitoring how well the participants are communicating with each other—who has spoken, who has not, and whose points have not yet received a fair hearing.

- **Follow and focus the conversation flow**

To help keep the group on the topic, it is helpful to occasionally restate the key question or insight under discussion. It is important to guide gently, yet persistently. You might ask, “How does your point relate to the topic?” or state, “That’s an interesting point, but let’s return to the central issue.” Keep careful track of time.

- **Do not fear silence**

It is alright if people are quiet for a while. When deciding when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Sometimes group members only need more time to think through alternatives or to consider what has just been said.

- **Accept and summarize expressed opinions**

Accepting shows respect for each participant in the group. It is important for the facilitator to make it clear that dialogue discussions involve no right or wrong responses.

- **Anticipate conflict and tend to the ground rules**

When conflict arises, explain that disagreement over ideas is to be expected. Remind participants that conflict must stay on the issue. Do not allow it to become personal. Appeal to the group to help resolve the conflict and abide by the ground rules. You may have to stop and refer to the ground rules several times throughout the discussion.

- **Close the dialogue**

Give participants a chance to talk about the most important thing they gained from the discussion. You may ask them to share any new ideas or thoughts they've had as a result of the discussion. Ask them to think about what worked and what didn't. Remember to thank everyone for their participation.

Here's how to handle some challenging situations

The best method for handling challenging situations is to anticipate them and be prepared. Each dialogue is a unique experience, providing new opportunities for the discussion leader. Even those who have been facilitators for many years are often faced with new problems requiring on-the-spot creative action. There are no certain answers; sometimes groups just do not go well, and other times all participants seem engaged and satisfied. The following scenarios present some possible challenges to the facilitator and offer some guidelines for handling them:

- **The group is slow to respond to the process**

Check to determine whether your directions have been understood. You may need to restate the purpose of the process and how it should be carried out. You may also have people who resist participating because of “power” issues in the group. If so, invite them to participate to the degree they feel comfortable. Assure them that the purpose of the process is to share different insights, experiences and personal reflections on the topic. However the members choose to participate is valuable.

- **One or a few members dominate the dialogue**

The instructions you give to participants about respecting time limits are helpful. Invite participants to be conscious of each person having time to share his or her reflections, ideas and insights. It may be helpful to invoke the ground rule “It is important to share time” when a few individuals dominate the discussion. Another solution

is to tell the group you want to hear from those who have not said much. Participants will look to you to restrain domineering members. Sometimes this situation happens when those dominating the dialogue feel they have not been heard. Restating the essence of what they've expressed can show that you have understood their point of view.

- **A participant walks out of a group following a heated conflict**

Sometimes the conversation may become heated. Other times, people may seem to be on the verge of fighting, and sometimes they may even walk out. The best way to deal with conflict is to confront it directly. Remind participants that they were told initially to expect conflict but that they agreed to respond to differences respectfully. The facilitator should always stop name-calling, personal attacks and threats. This is one situation where you should readily appeal to the group for support. If they accepted the ground rules, they will support you.



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The Dialogue Questions

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These seven questions could form the backbone of your dialogue. Several sub-questions are offered as prompts to assist you in deepening the dialogue. You decide which questions to spend more time on. It is not necessary to get consensus, but do seek focus.

You may find that these questions do not meet with the needs of the group. They are suggestions only and the organising team should feel free to develop their own set of questions to better address their situation.

Community

1. What do you believe are the two to three most important characteristics of a healthy community?
 - When you picture a healthy community, what stands out?
2. What makes you most proud of your community?

What's Working

3. What are some specific examples of people or groups working together to improve the quality of life in your community? (*Listen for and record compelling statements and stories.*)
 - How did these come about? Who was involved? How did they access needed resources? What was accomplished?
 - How do you think some of these efforts could be expanded?
 - What are the most important lessons you have learned from both successful and unsuccessful community efforts?

Issues

4. What do you believe are the two to three most important issues that must be addressed to improve the quality of life in your community?
 - If you could improve one thing in your community right now, what would it be?
 - What are the two to three most important challenges your community will face in the next five to ten years?

Causes and Barriers

5. What do you believe is keeping your community from doing what needs to be done to improve the quality of life? *(Refer to issues identified in question #4.)*
- What do you believe are the underlying causes or reasons for these barriers?
 - What is your community currently doing to address these issues?
 - What makes leadership difficult on these issues?

Policy and Practice

6. What actions and solutions would you support to build a better community?
- What changes in how your community spends its time and resources would make your community better (at work, school, recreation, in community life, etc.)?
 - What responsibility do community members have in building a better community?

Community Action

7. What would excite you enough to become involved (or more involved) in improving your community?
- What is the best way to engage other community members?
 - What is the best way to get youth, parents, organizations, businesses, schools, media, etc. involved?
 - How can you best build upon the assets and strengths of your community?
 - How could learning from this conversation apply to your current activities?
 - Are there any obvious next steps?



Worksheet to Create Your Own Community Profile

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1. What is the purpose of the dialogue?

2. What are its main goals?

3. What are some additional hoped-for outcomes?

4. Where should the dialogue take place?

5. When should the dialogue take place?

6. What outside issues could have an impact on the outcome of the dialogue?

7. Should the dialogue be open to everyone in the community, should it be by invitation only, or should it include a mix of invited participants and others?

8. If the participation is by invitation, how will participants be selected?

9. Who can help out with the dialogue, and how?

10. What other services are required for the dialogue (i.e. facilitation, translation services, etc.) and how can they be obtained?



Sample Invitation to Community Dialogue Workshop

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It gives us great pleasure to invite you to participate in (**name of dialogue**), a community dialogue workshop on (**topic**). This workshop will bring together (**how many**) citizens from across the region in (**name of city, town**) on (**date**).

The (**name of dialogue**) offers an exceptional opportunity to work toward achieving the best quality of life for our community. Who better represents the spirit and purpose of our citizens than you or your organization?

The (**name of dialogue**) will assemble citizens, representatives from (**local, regional**) community organizations, and representatives of government in a workshop setting, to consider and debate a series of key priority issues for our region. This community dialogue workshop will focus on (**give sense of objectives**). Some of the topics may include:

- Topic/theme
- Topic/theme

By the end of the session, participants will have (**describe the outcomes for the dialogue**).

This is an invaluable opportunity to share your views and help make informed decisions about your community's future. Please do not hesitate to contact us (**area code and telephone number or a 1-800 number**), if you have comments or questions.

Please join us in lending your valuable voice to the collective vision for our community. We look forward to meeting you at the (**name of the workshop**) in (**city, town**) on (**date**).

Yours sincerely,



Sample Letter of Reminder

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Dear,

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The **(host group)** is writing to you regarding a past mailing in which you were invited to the **(name of session)** on **(date)** being held on **(city, town, venue)**.

As space is limited and to ensure a balance from around the **(region)**, I wanted to take this opportunity to follow-up with you on your interest in participating at the **(name of the session)**. If you are interested in attending, you will find enclosed an invitation and registration form, as well as a draft agenda.

The **(host group)** plans to open up the invitation list in the near future, and the registration and confirmation will then be done on a "first come, first serve" basis.

All those involved are looking forward to this exciting opportunity to have representatives of the community and organizations come together to discuss important issues and to help formulate community-driven responses that we can all support.

Thank you for your interest and I hope to see you on **(date)**.

Yours sincerely,

For more information, please contact:
(contact information)



Participant Evaluation Form

Based on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good, and 5 = excellent), please rate the degree to which the dialogue achieved or provided the following:

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Clear dialogue objectives					
2. Clear outcomes and next steps					
3. Effective facilitation					
4. Opportunity to participate in discussions					
5. An effective registration process					
6. Well organized travel arrangements					
7. Comfortable and appropriate facilities					
8. Quality food service					

9. What motivated you to come to the dialogue?

10. What was your overall impression of the dialogue? (Please circle)

Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5



11. What do you believe to be the most important outcome of the dialogue?

12. How could the dialogue have been improved? What could have been done differently to have increased your level of satisfaction?

13. Please use the space provided below to make any other comments or suggestions you may have in relation to the dialogue.

[illegible]

Community Dialogue Toolkit Evaluation

We would appreciate your feedback. Please fill in this questionnaire and return it to the Rural Secretariat. Postage will be paid by the Secretariat. Thank you.

Please put a checkmark under the title of each section which you have read, used and/or found useful.

	...have read	...used	...found helpful
1. What is a Community Dialogue?			
2. Dialogue Questions			
3. For the Dialogue Facilitator			
4. Regional Advisors/Rural Teams			
5. Worksheet to Create Your Own Community Profile			
6. Sample Invitation to Community Dialogue Workshop			
7. Sample Letter of Reminder			
8. Participant Evaluation Form			

How do you suggest we improve this toolkit? _____

Other comments: _____

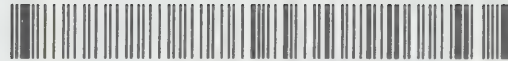
I live in:

- ☐ rural Canada
☐ remote Canada
☐ urban Canada

I am a:

- ☐ voluntary or non-government organization employee
☐ municipal/regional government employee
☐ provincial/territorial government employee
☐ federal government employee
☐ elected official
☐ other stakeholder

Other: _____



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930 CARLING AVE
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SECRÉTARIAT RURAL
AGRICULTURE ET AGROALIMENTAIRE CANADA
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930 AV CARLING
OTTAWA ON K1A 9Z9

Community Dialogue Toolkit

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Introduction

Many rural communities have expressed an interest in holding dialogue sessions, but are unsure of where to start or the steps involved in organizing one. As part of the Government of Canada's ongoing commitment to rural Canada, we have developed the Community Dialogue Toolkit to help initiate the dialogue process. A community dialogue is the first step in identifying issues and opportunities within a community that can ultimately lead to a higher quality of life.

Listening to Canadians living in rural and remote areas is one cornerstone of the Canadian Rural Partnership. Responding to their needs by building networks and providing support at the grassroots level is another. The Partnership has, since 1998, conducted an ongoing dialogue with rural Canadians from all parts of the country, and they have indicated a strong interest in continuing the dialogue.

The Community Dialogue Toolkit is a "how to" guide to holding community-based dialogue sessions. It has been written for use by community leaders of all types. Anyone who can start a conversation can use this toolkit. It offers a flexible approach that can be easily adapted to your community and its objectives.

We encourage you to use this toolkit to identify goals, build partnerships and seek out solutions that fit your community. You are also encouraged to share the results of your dialogues with the Government of Canada and other levels of government in order to maintain an awareness of rural Canada and the challenges it faces.

For further information on the Canadian Rural Partnership, please visit our Internet site at www.rural.gc.ca or call 1-888-781-2222.



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What is a Community Dialogue?



What is a Community Dialogue?

A community dialogue is a forum that draws participants from as many parts of the community as possible to exchange information face-to-face, share personal stories and experiences, honestly express perspectives, clarify viewpoints, and develop solutions to community concerns and opportunities.

Unlike debate, dialogue emphasizes listening to deepen understanding. It develops common perspectives and goals, and allows participants to express their own interests.

As you will discover in this toolkit, a dialogue is a community conversation that can take many forms. It can involve five people around a kitchen table, five-hundred people in a large community hall, or anything in between.

Why Should Our Community Host a Dialogue?

A dialogue has many uses. It can:

- **Expand** the base of constituencies and voices (i.e. youth, business, grassroots leaders) who bring their expertise and interest to existing and new community partnerships.
- **Reach** common ground—integrate the workings of more formal institutions and partnerships with the leadership from neighbourhoods and grassroots groups.
- **Surface** common issues and the resources to address them—help identify barriers to positive change and uncover innovative ideas.
- **Sustain** an ongoing community discourse and exchange between the many groups and partnerships in a community.
- **Build** the capacity of your group to act on its ideas.
- **Launch** new initiatives and strengthen the impact of existing community improvement partnerships.
- **Focus** corporate and organizational investment towards greater community benefit.



- **Break through** community “turf wars” and connect fragmented resources—build the public consensus and commitment necessary to generate action for better outcomes.
- **Stimulate** action and track progress for accountability.
- **Generate** local media attention.
- **Help** leaders of all sectors see their role in building healthy, sustainable communities.
- **Aim for a change of heart, not just a change of mind**
Dialogues go beyond sharing and understanding to transforming participants. While the process begins with the individual, it eventually involves groups and institutions. Ultimately, dialogues can affect how policies, programs and decisions are made.

What Makes for Successful Dialogue?

The nature of the dialogue process can motivate people to work towards change. Effective dialogues do the following:

- **Move towards solutions rather than continue to express or analyse the problem**
An emphasis on personal responsibility moves the discussion away from the problems and towards constructive common action.
- **Reach beyond the usual boundaries**
When fully developed, dialogues can involve the entire community, offering opportunities for new, unexpected partnerships. New partnerships can develop when participants listen carefully and respectfully to each other, and understand each other's perspectives.

What Resources Are Available to Communities?

The following is a list of federal departments and agencies that may be able to assist you with either your dialogue session or any projects resulting from it.

- The main contact for all types of business information is the Canada Business Service Centre: 1-888-576-4444.
- Or, call your regional development contact, the route to Community Futures and Community Business Development Corporations in many communities:
 - **Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA)**
1-800-561-7862
 - **Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions (CED)**
(514) 283-6412
 - **Western Economic Diversification (WD)**
1-888-338-9378

- **Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor)**
1-877-333-6673

We have also included a copy of the Pocket Directory of Rural Programs and Services that can be referred to for information on programs and services that may be of assistance.

Getting Started— Steps in Organizing a Dialogue

As someone who is considering organizing a dialogue, you have several choices ranging from the very simple to the somewhat complex. There is no one “best way.” It depends on what you want to accomplish. Tailor an approach that works best for your objectives, setting, participants, time and capacities. Whatever your approach, for a lasting impact on the larger community, it is a good idea to think about how you will sustain the project before you begin. Dialogue may start at many levels and in many ways. While the guidance provided below can be adapted for the small “ad-hoc” gathering, it is generally intended for a larger effort.

Brainstorming is the first step in organising a community dialogue event or activity. Organising teams need to take the time required to answer the five Ws (Who, What, Where, When and Why) before designing the community dialogue. Brainstorming these questions will assist in determining the goals

of the dialogue and thinking about the hoped-for outcomes. It will also help the team in finding potential partners, dividing up responsibilities, preparing a budget and deciding on a date and location.

We have included a worksheet with some basic questions to help you think about organising a community dialogue. They are meant to be a starting point. Answering these questions will help you better understand the purpose and potential of your effort. You may wish to use the worksheet to sketch a profile of your own community.

To Get The Most From Your Dialogue

Step 1: Prepare For Your Dialogue

- **Build a Dialogue Team to “host” the event**

A team approach to convening a dialogue will help to build ownership and spread the tasks involved. The team can help you to define goals for the project. Identify a few people with whom you have worked before and/or have credibility with those you want to invite to the dialogue.

- **Determine your own goals for the dialogue**

Your community may have some specific goals for the dialogue itself and the information received from it. (Refer to page 2, “Why Should Our Community Host a Dialogue?” for some possible goals.) The design of the dialogue session should reflect this.

- **Determine the group of participants**

Who would you like to bring together to share ideas and opinions? Whose opinions are critical to include? Consider seeking a diversity of voices. To minimize the effort required for recruitment, you may find it easiest to partner with an existing group. This will allow you to use their network. You may also wish to engage new voices. Dialogue groups may be as small as five people or as large as 500—it’s just a matter of how your dialogue is designed, what you want to accomplish and how much time you have. Most groups will include from 12 to 30 participants.

- **Select and prepare your facilitator**

Good facilitation is critical to a successful dialogue. You should enlist an experienced facilitator or someone who is a good listener and can inspire conversation while remaining neutral. It is important for the facilitator to get comfortable with the dialogue objectives, purpose and questions, and determine how to best design the conversation. It is also

important that the facilitator be familiar with the community in question. We have included helpful guidelines for the dialogue facilitator. Your facilitator may even want to practice her/his skills with the Dialogue Team to make any changes that may need to occur.

- **Set a place, date and time for your dialogue**

Choose a spot that is comfortable and accessible. Dialogues can be conveniently held in someone’s home, a community centre, library or private dining room of a local restaurant. Hospitals, schools and businesses often have conference rooms or cafeterias where groups can meet. Keeping sites convenient to the participants is key. Determine the time period (from one to three hours). Be sure to give a minimum of two weeks’ notice of your dialogue meeting. A reminder call two days before the event will help to increase attendance.

- **Create an inviting environment**

Dialogues should be held at a neutral location so that all participants feel at ease with the process. Accessibility and special needs must also be considered (i.e. wheel chair access, language, transportation). Seating arrangements are important in a smaller group. To assure strong interaction, place seats in a circle or in a “U” formation. Refreshments (or food for a breakfast or lunch meeting) are a welcome and

appropriate sign of appreciation, but are not absolutely necessary. Many times, local businesses are willing to donate refreshments for community meetings.

Step 2: Invite Participants

People are naturally attracted to those who speak from commitment and possibility. People want to talk about what's possible in their community. Determine how to access your desired participants. Contact friends, co-workers or specific community groups. Personal contact makes the difference! A telephone call with a follow-up letter or flier with the details is usually very effective. Don't worry if someone says no.

Remember, if you wish to have a specific number of people in your group, you may need to recruit one and a half to two times as many. If you want a large group that involves many community constituencies, it may be wise to advertise the dialogue in newsletters or fliers placed where people gather: in coffee shops, grocery stores, gyms, daycare centres or libraries.

To ensure the right balance for your group(s), you may need to consider the following. First, "Which voices need to be included?" Answering that question will ensure the diversity necessary for successful dialogues. Then, "Who is missing?" That answer will steer you towards others who need to be involved.

Generate interest by doing the following:

- Ask community leaders and other influential members of the community to help rally the public;
- Identify the appropriate media for the audience you are trying to reach—consider placing an announcement in a small local weekly or monthly newspaper, on a community bulletin board, or even on an electronic community bulletin board;
- Post an announcement in grocery stores in the community;
- Invite yourself to various group meetings in the community to get the word out; and
- Approach local chapters of national organizations.

Step 3: Plan to Record Your Dialogue

- **Designate a person on the Dialogue Team to take notes and summarize important points**

The recorder need not keep a word-by-word account of the conversation, but should summarize the group's views during their interaction. It's just as important to note areas of disagreement as consensus.

Obtaining quotations and stories from participants is essential. The facilitator should plan to sit down with the recorder immediately after the dialogue to review the notes and prepare a summary.

Step 4: Conducting the Dialogue

- **Greet participants**

It is important for the facilitator to greet participants as they arrive. This will help put guests at ease and encourage them to speak up.

- **Introduction**

The facilitator should introduce her/himself and thank the participants for attending. A brief introduction, stating the purpose of the dialogue and the importance of asking the community for their opinions should follow. If the group is small, the facilitator may ask each participant to introduce himself or herself.

- **Initiate the dialogue**

The questions included in this toolkit are for your use during the dialogue. There are seven primary questions with a series of sub-questions for your consideration. These sub-questions are ideas to stimulate and guide the group's conversation. Not all sub-questions need to be asked. Please tailor the dialogue to your community's needs; adjustments will be needed. You may also wish to create your own set of questions. If the group is large, the facilitator may wish to project the questions on overhead transparencies for all to see.

- **Engage the media and document the event**

Some groups will want to have local media present to report on the dialogue and its findings. You may also want to take a few photos or video clips of the event. There may be the opportunity to place photos on a participating group's Web site, along with a summary of the event.

Step 5: Concluding the Dialogue and Next Steps

At the end of the dialogue session, the facilitator can thank the group for taking the time to share ideas and personal values. The group should consider some possible next steps, but should not feel obliged to do something together. The group recorder may give a summary of the dialogue.

A dialogue report should be prepared and distributed to participants. The dialogue team also needs to consider who else would benefit from the results of the dialogue. Other people or groups that should receive a copy of the report include community leaders, municipal governments, Rural Teams (contact information included), local organizations and media.

Possible next steps

- The group may be excited about a particular idea it would like to take action on, and agree to meet again to develop some action plans.
- The group may decide to have a more in-depth conversation and involve some missing voices and perspectives from their neighbourhood (or to involve their elected representatives and the local newspaper).
- The group may decide to have additional dialogues on other subjects of importance to them.
- The group may share information about existing community efforts that could benefit from volunteers and additional leadership.

The next steps will vary for all groups, but it is important to ensure that participants are clearly aware of what is planned, and also to keep them updated on what happens in the longer term as a result of the dialogue and their participation.

How Well Did We Do?

- **Document and evaluate the project**

Keep a record of the individuals and groups who take part in the dialogues and of how well the discussions go. Include such things as number of participants, group composition, main topics discussed, how productive the discussions were, how they might have been improved, and other thoughts on what worked well and what did not. This will allow you to see how attitudes and perceptions have changed and whether changes need to be made in the dialogue format.

- **Have participants evaluate the dialogue**

Depending on their goals, each group will evaluate the dialogue, whether a single session or a series, after it is over. Evaluations can be written and/or expressed verbally. You may wish to distribute a short evaluation form to elicit participant feedback and to measure the impact of the dialogue. We have included a sample evaluation form for your use. Questions can be modified to meet the needs of the team.

Acknowledgements

Some sections reprinted from “Healthy People in Healthy Communities – A dialogue guide” and “One America Dialogue Guide – Conducting a Discussion on Race” with the permission of:

The Health Research and Educational Trust/Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities, copyright 2000. For more information about the organization and its resources, the Health Research and Educational Trust may be accessed at www.aha.orh/hret or www.healthycommunities.org.

The President's Initiative on Race (PIR) and the Community Relations Service (CRS), U.S. Department of Justice.

For more information on the Community Dialogue Toolkit or the Canadian Rural Partnership, please contact **1-888-757-8725** or visit the Web site at www.rural.gc.ca.

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Regional Advisors / Rural Teams

The Rural Secretariat is interested in learning about the information needs of rural residents, your ideas and suggestions for the future of rural Canada and how we can best serve you.

We encourage you to contact us. The Rural Secretariat is headquartered in Ottawa with regional offices in Whitehorse, Nelson, Calgary, Winnipeg, Guelph, Goulais River, Québec City, Moncton, Halifax, Edmonton, Charlottetown and St. John's.

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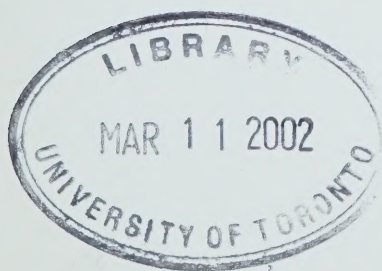
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